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South African languages reading benchmarks policy brief

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1. Introduction

In early 2019 South African president Cyril Ramaphosa articulated a new and clear expectation for basic education: every child should be able to read for meaning by age 10 (South African Government, 2019). While reading for meaning is the goal of reading, reading is a complex and hierarchical process. A range of foundational reading subskills needs to be mastered before one can comprehend or understand what is in a text.

In response, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in collaboration with various stakeholders has been leading the establishment of early-grade reading benchmarks for all eleven South African languages. These benchmarks set key thresholds of early reading outcomes, such as reading fluency (words read correctly per minute) that are necessary for children to reach in grades 1, 2 and 3 to be on track to read with adequate comprehension by the age of ten. Given the different orthographic structures of South Africa's various languages, these benchmarks need to be developed separately for the different language groups.

2. Which benchmarks have been developed?

So far efforts by the DBE have developed and officially adopted early-grade reading benchmarks for the Nguni language group, the Sesotho-Setswana language group, English First Additional Language (EFAL) and Afrikaans. The benchmarks are for **Grade 1 to 3 for Home Languages and then Grade 1 to 6 for EFAL. This table summarises all the available reading benchmarks.**

	Nguni home language group (Siswati, isiZulu, isiXhosa)	Sesotho-Setswana home language group	Afrikaans home language	English First Additional Language
By the end of grade 1, all learners should be able to sound	40 clspm (letters)	40 clspm (letters)	40 clspm	N/A
By the end of grade 2, all learners should be able to sound	20 cwpm (Words and Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) Grade 2)	40 cwpm (Words and ORF Grade 2)	50 cwpm	30 cwpm
By the end of grade 3, all learners should be able to sound	35 cwpm (ORF Grade 4)	60 cwpm (ORF Grade 4)	80 cwpm	50 cwpm
By the end of grade 4, all learners should be able to sound	N/A	N/A	N/A	70 cwpm
By the end of grade 5, all learners should be able to sound	N/A	N/A	N/A	90 cwpm
By the end of grade 6, all learners should be able to sound	N/A	N/A	N/A	100 cwpm

3. What are the uses of Reading Benchmarks?

With the use of the reading benchmarks, we can categorise each learner's reading level to measure their progress during the year to see if they are reading on track for their grade. Table 2 below shows the various uses of benchmarks. These uses are split into 3 categories: National and Provincial administration, Schools, and the Classroom. Each of these are currently being explored by the DBE.

Table 2: Usage of African Language Reading Benchmarks

National and Provincial Administration	School	Classroom
Establishes definition of reading proficiency	Standards and targets that school leaders can aim towards	Standard against which to measure learner skills
Clearly communicates standards and targets	Standardises assessment practices across and within schools	Early identification of learners at risk of not being able to read

In addition to the uses above, teacher training providers (both pre-service and in-service) should integrate these benchmarks into their programmes. Programme developers in a multi-donor context can integrate benchmarks into the design of Early Grade Reading interventions. District Curriculum Teams can identify realistic targets against which to assess appropriate achievement for each grade and school. For donors and evaluators, benchmarks provide an explicit standardised criterion against which programmes can be valued to determine their effectiveness and impact.

4. How were the benchmarks established?

A design process convened by the DBE with multiple stakeholders including RTI International specialists who have led similar processes in other developing country contexts was initiated. The design process culminated in the Setting Reading Benchmarks report (Khulisa Management Services, 2020) documenting data approaches and empirical methodologies to support benchmarking. The design phase informed

decisions on which grades and languages to benchmark; e.g. Grade 1, 2 and 3 respectively for Home Language. A further decision was taken to benchmark each language separately and then compare these benchmarks within each African language family. If consistent patterns emerged, then a language family benchmark could be adopted.

5. How were languages and data selected?

The choice of which language to benchmark first was informed by the availability of existing reading data. For the Nguni language group, learner assessment data from five different studies in three Nguni languages: isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Siswati were used. This resulted in it being the largest compilation of early grade reading assessment data. This included nearly 16,400 unique learners across 660 typically no-fee schools. No large-scale data was available for isiNdebele. The Sesotho-Setswana early grade reading benchmarks are based on reading assessments of more than 24 000 unique learners across more than 400 no-fee schools in the North West, Free State and Limpopo provinces. The Afrikaans benchmarks are based on data collected from 100 schools in 2022 in the Western Cape. The EFAL benchmarks drew on five different studies, data was compiled with multiple assessment points for over 20,000 unique learners from Grades 2 to 7, across 6 of 9 provinces. These data are almost exclusively drawn from no-fee schools.

6. Future Plans

Plans are underway to benchmark three languages in 2023; Xitsonga, Tshivenda and English Home Language. This would conclude all the languages. This work has been led by the DBE in collaboration with a strong coalition of donors, academics and officials including the DBE, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Research on Socio-Economics Policy (ReSEP), the University of Cape Town (UCT), Funda Wande, Old Mutual and Zenex Foundation have been collaborating in this work to date.

Detailed reports are accessible here:

Design Report- Setting Reading Benchmarks in South Africa
Summary Report- Benchmarking in the Nguni Languages
Technical Report- Benchmarking Early Grade Reading Skills in Nguni Languages
Afrikaans Early Grade Reading Benchmarks Report
Summary Report- English as a First Additional Language Benchmarking
Technical Report- English as a First Additional Language Benchmarking
Sesotho-Setswana Language Group Benchmarks Report
Technical Report- Sepedi Early Grade Reading Benchmarks
Summary Report-Setswana Early Grade Reading Benchmarks
Technical Report-Setswana Early Grade Reading Benchmarks
Sesotho-Setswana Language Group Benchmarks Learning Brief (English)
Sesotho-Setswana Language Group Benchmarks Learning Brief (Sepedi)
Sesotho-Setswana Language Group Benchmarks Learning Brief (Sesotho)
Sesotho-Setswana Language Group Benchmarks Learning Brief (Setswana)
English as a First Additional Language Benchmark Learning Brief
Afrikaans Learning Brief (English)
Afrikaans Learning Brief (Afrikaans)